DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 730 PS 027 576

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TITLE Semiotic Processes in Women's Coordination of Work and Family.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Conference of the Society for Research in Child Development (Albuquerque, NM, April 14-18, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Rearing; Day Care; Early Childhood Education; *Employed Parents; *Family Work Relationship; *Mother Attitudes; *Mothers; Parent Child Relationship; *Role Conflict; Role Perception; *Semiotics
IDENTIFIERS Role Strain

ABSTRACT

This study examined how women who work in the professions and who have been mothers for 1 to 4 years construct and coordinate their roles as professionals and as mothers, in terms of both the symbolic meanings of these roles and the practical organization of their daily activity related to these roles. Fifteen women participated in extensive individual interviews designed to probe the personal significance of each role, professional and mother, and to explore their thoughts and feelings about day care, child-rearing, and women's roles in society. The perspectives taken in coordinating work and family were identified from the transcribed interviews. Additionally, the form of coordination (oppositional or nonoppositional) was identified. Findings revealed four perspectives: (1) ego-anchored, in which self figures prominently, with pleasures and stresses of working and mothering contributing to one's development; (2) child-anchored, in which the child's needs are prominent; (3) role-anchored/work, emphasizing professional identity, work, and professional achievements and satisfactions; and (4) role-anchored family, emphasizing the maternal role, identification with it, and enjoyment derived from it. Oppositional forms of coordination were evident in statements regarding conflict or situations in which one domain constrains activity in another. Nonoppositional coordination was apparent in considerations of tradeoffs and specific positive effects across domains. Lengthy citations from interviews illustrate the perspectives. The perspectives act as mediators of action, thinking, and feelings, in the domains of working, mothering, and coordinating the two and thus complements outcomes-oriented studies. (Contains 11 references.) (KB)

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ED 429 730

Semiotic Processes in Women's Coordination of Work and Family

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Poster presented at
Society for Research in Child Development Annual Conference
Albuquerque, NM, April 14-18, 1999

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Semiotic Processes in Women's Coordination of Work and Family

Recent research on relationships between women's professional and family roles has emphasized the need to understand psychological processes leading to parent and parenting outcomes and to understand the psychosocial mechanisms involved in relationships between these two domains (Greenberger, O'Neil, & Nagel, 1994; Kessler & McRae, 1982; Perry-Jenkins, Seery, & Crouter, 1992).

Some research has indicated the importance of the "symbolic meanings" that work and parenting roles have in influencing outcomes (e.g., Grossman & Chester, 1990; Thompson & Walker, 1989). In this view, parent and child outcomes and conditions of their emergence cannot be understood unless attention is given to the particular meanings of role categories and characteristics for individuals. However, most investigations of the meanings of work and parenting roles for individuals in these roles takes a static view of social roles and their meanings. Furthermore, the correlational design of most studies, in which group measures of attitudes and beliefs about work and parent roles are correlated with group outcome scores, obscures the psychological processes and the personal meanings that give rise to these outcomes. Thus, most studies of psychological processes mediating outcomes have been limited in their exploration of both psychological processes and the particular meanings that mediate coordination of working and parenting and outcomes related to them.

The present study overcomes these limitations by taking a dynamic, developmental approach. It examines women's meaning construction processes involved in coordinating working and child-rearing. The concept of perspectives as semiotic regulators of action affords a dynamic view social roles, of women's role fulfillment, and of developmental processes in women's role coordination. The process-oriented method used in this study preserves the developmental characteristics of the phenomenon under study (Richters, 1997).

The goal of the study was to examine how women who work in the professions and who have been mothers for 1 to 4 years construct and coordinate their roles as professionals and as mothers, in terms of both the symbolic meanings of these roles and the practical organization of their daily activity related to these roles.

The Study

This study takes a developmental and personological approach to the investigation of semiotic processes (Valsiner, 1989, 1998,), using analyses of individual cases to construct and test models of the processes involved in women's symbolic and practical coordination of working and mothering (Thorngate, 1986).

This perspective entails a dynamic, process view of the phenomenon: coordinating working and mothering involves continuous, goal-directed action that is regulated by the online assembly of particular meanings in particular situations. Thus the usual "factors" that are understood to organize outcomes related to working and parenting -- beliefs, attitudes, and goals -- are better seen as meanings that conditionally and contingently mediate outcomes. Individual meaning-construction processes related to role activity and identity are crucial mediating mechanisms in the coordination of working

and parenting, guiding individuals' coordination of the two roles and influencing "spill-over effects" between the two domains of activity.

Method

Extensive individual interviews were conducted with 15 women, each of whom was working in a profession (e.g., engineer, physician) and was the mother of at least one child between the ages of 1 and 4 years at the time of the interview(s). The interviews were designed to probe the personal significance of each role, professional and mother, and to explore women's thoughts and feelings about day care, child-rearing, and women's roles in society. All interviews were transcribed in full. For the analyses reported here, "perspective"-taking processes were identified across a subset of 10 interviews, and the key characteristics of these perspectives the reasoning processes they organize were analyzed.

Analytical Framework and Analyses

Perspectives on Coordination

Analysis of the transcripts involved examining women's meaning-construction related to work, mothering, and the coordination of the two in terms of the concept of perspectives. In addition, targeted utterances were analyzed for the form of coordination of work and family they implied: either oppositional or nonoppositional.

Perspectives are semiotic regulators or meaning complexes that mediate action, thinking, and feeling in the domains of working, mothering, and coordinating the two. Four types of perspectives were prominent in women's reasoning about the coordination of work and family: Ego-Anchored, Child-Anchored, Role-Anchored/Work, and Role-Anchored/Family

Each of these perspectives implies a complex of institutional, sociocultural, and personal meanings related to a situation, problem, or event. In addition, a perspective implies a goal-orientation (Valsiner, Branco, & Melo Dantas, 1997). Action, thinking and feeling are grounded in and organized by a goal-oriented perspectives in situated action.

The Function of Perspectives

Perspectives are assembled in-the-moment, in the course of action or reflection related to working, mothering, or the coordination of these. Perspectives organize action in the moment, which "feeds forward" (e.g., in the form of anticipations and consequences) to guide future actions (Valsiner, 1998). In action and reasoning processes, individuals may shift more or less frequently among perspectives across contexts and over time. Although the perspectives are "constructed in-the-moment and for the moment," individuals may exhibit patterning in perspectives they assume, and perspectives may be relatively enduring.

In essence, this concept of "perspective" is an alternative to the notion of social role. The dynamic, action-oriented concept of perspective offers the possibility of moving beyond the presupposition that the meanings of social roles for individuals are fixed, uniform, or static for individuals. As the analyses demonstrated, the meanings of social roles – e.g., being a lawyer, being a mother -- can shift from reasoning context to reasoning context, in light of specific concerns, conditions, needs, etc., that individuals focus on in the moment.

In addition to overcoming some of the limiting assumptions that a person's meanings related work and family are fixed, the notion of perspective elides the presupposition, prevalent in many studies of relationships between work and family, that activities, decision-making, and reflection related to each domain are restricted to a setting. The notion of perspectives in situated meaning construction processes highlights the flexible and "multi-local" nature of "doing being a mother" and "doing being a professional".

That the meanings of social roles for individuals instantiating them are not fixed but rather involve continual process of evaluating and reevaluating goals, choices, tradeoffs, etc., related to coordinating working and mothering is evident in the following three interview excerpts:

Excerpt 1.

> **I really like my job. It's something that I have to evaluate everyday** because I have this ridiculously long commute into work **and so when I am sitting there in traffic I am always thinking, "Is this really worth it?" and I decide it is** -- so the reward is that I really like my job -- and I really love being a parent -- I love my kids.

Excerpt 2.

> OK, can I just tell you one thing that I often think about? **One of the things is the context of all this in society, and what I want to do, and struggling with, "Do I want to quit work and be a stay at home mom?", which I never entertain for very long, but when I would feel those pangs of guilt, "Am I not being a good mother?", I look at people like Rose Bird or like ... even silly things like Katie Corvic . . . . And I know that they have kids, and you say, "Ok I can't imagine that their kids are complete basket cases, because Mom worked all these years."** .... Sometimes I would look at people ... like Ruth Bater Ginsberg, that had children. ... She made it to supreme court of the United State and she had children, so she did juggle both and sometimes I think "OK. There are some women out there who have stable secure kids who still have jobs." **... I keep some of them in mind**.

Excerpt 3.

> **It's more because it's just too much stress in my life right now and it's partly from owning the company**. I think if I was working in a large company and I just went and did my job and came home -- I don't know how easily I could do that after owning a company -- but that it would probably be a lot less stress. **So we have been talking about after the baby's born, is it feasible that I could take a year off because it's just too much stress and it's just not worth it** and sometimes **I'll come home and be telling Steve about my day and my voice will raise and Marisa is like "Are you OK, Mommy?" You know 'cause she can tell immediately when I'm stressed and it's just not worth it. So yeah, we have been thinking about it the past week or two, sometimes it's just not worth it all that stress.**

Identifying "Perspectives"

Categorization of an utterance is determined not by a single characteristic or variable but depends on a range of discourse forms and reasoning processes (see below).

Descriptions of Perspectives

Ego-Anchored Perspective: In the ego-anchored perspective, some notion of "self" figures prominently. The pleasures and stresses of the two domains (working and mothering) are seen as positive or negative contributors to the development and/or well-being of one's self or one's life, as opposed to either being the focal consideration itself. Often a "life span perspective" is articulated, in which the life course is superordinate to the social roles (indexed through the perspective), which are articulated as differentially important at different life phases (e.g., "My kids will be in school in a couple years, and if I didn't have a career, my life would seem empty then"). Neither role-identity is strongly identified as unique or primary in its importance to the speaker's self identity (e.g., "I see myself as a lawyer first, and a mother second"). Within reasoning process, an individual may shift from perspective to perspective but will finally "anchor" in the self- perspective.

Child-Anchored Perspective: In this perspective, considerations of the child and her/his needs are prominent. Pleasures and/or stresses related to caring for child are thematized, as are child's particular

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or general needs. The child's needs are often cited as constraining the speaker's work-domain activity or employment. Often mention is made of others' limited capacity to meet child's needs, in contrast to speaker, who is more suited, able, or willing to meet (particular) needs of child. Duties related to child-care may be negatively evaluated, but duty or desire to meet child's needs is not characterized as conditional or contingent. Emphasis is not on contribution of maternal role-activity to speakers' wellbeing or development but on speaker's contribution to child's wellbeing.

Role-Anchored/Work: The speaker's professional identity, her work, and professional achievements and satisfactions are emphasized. Often, identification with the professional work role and enjoyment derived from this role are emphasized. Sacrifices made in course of professional accomplishments are often mentioned. In addition, speakers may construct symbolic distance form or limited identification with maternal role (e.g., "I would go crazy if I stayed home all the time;" or "I'm not the type of play on the floor with my kid all day long").

Role-Anchored/Family: The maternal role, identification with it, and enjoyment derived from this role are emphasized. This contrasts with child-anchored perspective, in which child's needs are emphasized. The speaker's identification with role of mother and enjoyment of role are emphasized. Mothering activities are usually elaborated beyond the narrow set of duties of caring for child to include play, special activities, and developing the mother-child affective relationship, as well as other household tasks and activities.

Perspectives in Process

In the course of everyday activity, perspectives are constructed in the moment and serve to regulate individuals' action. In the research interview context of the present study, interviewees were asked to describe and reflect upon various meanings and activities related to working and mothering and coordinating the two domains. Speakers' reasoning and describing activities, talk in the context of the interview, are organized by the perspective(s) speakers adopt.

For example, in being asked whether she feels any pressure to minimize the demands of her family life on her work life, an interviewee may construct an ego-anchored perspective that is superordinate to role domains, and evaluate the importance of two roles from this perspective. The ego-anchored position is usually indexed through use of nouns and noun phrases such as "my person," "my self," "my sense of self (worth)," "my identity," "who I am," and "my life" or "a life." The process of evaluation of the two domains may involve a consideration of the positive (e.g., happiness, enjoyment) and negative (e.g., stress, guilt) aspects of each role which accrue to the individual of the superordinate position.

Forms of Coordination

Coordination of work and family, in terms of both practical activity and symbolic meanings, can be either oppositional or nonoppositional. However, these are not fixed categories to which research participants are assigned. Rather, particular utterances are judged to imply a form of coordination as oppositional and nonoppositional. These judgments are based on local (specific instances in the interview talk), situated (in the context of discussion particular topics) description or reasoning processes. Forms of coordination emerge through the speaker's consideration of any of a myriad of conditions and contingencies – such as the speaker's satisfaction with her day care provider, her commute time, the child's health, her partner's career goals, and so forth. Some perspectives (e.g., child-anchored) may be associated with an oppositional coordination of work and family, although not necessarily. Every utterance can be characterized in terms of a perspective and an implied form of coordination of work and family.

Categorization of an utterance characterized by an oppositional or nonoppositional form of coordination is based on the following considerations:

Oppositional: Speaker mentions "dilemma" or "conflict," etc., or zero-sum propositions or situations. The speaker interprets one domain as posing problems for or constraining her activity in the other domain. In addition, the constraining of possibilities in one domain by the other is negatively evaluated and not offset by positive effects or other mitigating circumstances. Often mention is made of the desire to reduce level of involvement (either symbolically, practically, or temporally) in one domain in favor of increased involvement in other domain. Considerations of "tradeoffs" yield negative evaluation.

Nonoppositional: Sources of conflict between the two domains (working, mothering) may be cited but aspects of harmoniousness between the two domains, or ways that conflict can be or is overcome or mitigated, is more emphasized. Considerations of "tradeoffs" yield positive evaluation. Specific positive effects of one domain or each domain on the other are described. Absence of any mention of "dilemma" or "conflict," etc., or "zero-sum" propositions (e.g., "More time at work is less time that I can spend with my daughter."

In sum, coordinating work and family involves meaning construction processes in which speakers adopt perspectives, which are goal-oriented meaning-complexes made up of personal and social/institutional meanings.

Examples

Forms of work/family coordination, as oppositional or nonoppositional, are constructed from a perspective. These perspectives provide a set of meanings that organize the speaker's evaluation of activity, goals, etc., in the domains of working and mothering. Table 1 presents the matrix of perspective/coordination possibilities, and refers to corresponding examples below.

Perspective	Form of Coordination	
	Oppositional	Nonoppositional
Ego-Anchored	Example 5	Examples 4a, b, c
Child-Anchored	Example 6	
Role-Anchored/ Professional		
Role-Anchored/ Maternal		Example 7

Table 1. Matrix of perspectives and forms of coordination in women's talk about working and mothering. Tabled numbers refer to examples below.

The following interview excerpts exemplify perspectives in women's construction of meanings related to working and mothering and the coordination of the two. In some cases the excerpts also exemplify a form of coordination (either oppositional or nonopposistional) as well.

Example 4a: Ego-anchored perspective

> It's important **for me personally** to work to maintain **my sense of identity**. I'm not working for the money but I've become accustomed to having it .... But**, I'm working because it's important for my sense, my sense of self.** ...

Example 4b: Ego-anchored perspective, nonoppositional coordination

> I think when I was growing up I thought I would be a stay-at-home mom, because my mom was a stay-at-home mom [laughs]. But, um I think as I started working you know I was thirty-five before I had kids so I was working for a while, **so I started to think that I couldn't see how I could stay at home and not work** [laughs]. I mean **I just can't imagine not working at all because I get a lot of pleasure out of working and um, sense of worth, and um, sense of that what I do is important and people care that I'm doing it. And I think my fear about staying at home full-time is that you would feel like you didn't have a person beyond being a mother, like that you didn't feel like you had a life besides being a mother**. And that's why I don't want to be a stay-at-home mom. I feel like even if I had all the financial resources in the world I'd still want to work a couple days a week, at least. Because um .. I think it's real important to um, get away from home and the kids and get some perspective on it.

Example 4c: Ego-anchored perspective

> You either have a job, you're either working your job [by] taking care of your kids or you're working your job out in the, out somewhere else, as long as the kids are taken care of. ... But [working outside the house], it's like, it's like having two lives, really is what it comes down to it. ... I go out and do fun stuff but **I also focus on my job. And to all of a sudden just turn that off a become a mother and a housewife, you know, your conversations end up being about, you know, poops and throw-ups and diapers, all that kind of stuff, and you kind of lose your sense of self. You become your child's identity.**

Example 5. Ego-Anchored, Oppositional

> I'm very attached and committed [to my business] cause I'm one of the founders and I've really had a big part in helping it to grow to where it is right now so leaving it is a lot more than leaving a job. **... But there's always a trade off** you know. **"OK, how much stress do I want in my life"** and "Don't I want to enjoy my kids while they're young and be there 'cause now are the most formative years so that when they're teenagers they're not going to get out of whack and get into trouble 'cause it's so easy to do." ... **It is a big dilemma. I don't know about what I could do, if I could stay home on a full time basis I mean I may try it for a while and see if I don't go crazy, If I don't, it certainly will mellow me out a little bit.**

Example 6. Child-Anchored, Oppositional

But still there's always that pressure that I should be working more, you know. . **every day that I'm not here it increases his workload** because he has to cover my patients so. … **'Cause it's my goal first to spend more time with my daughter than at work. We don't want her at day care more than she's with me. [If I did I would feel] Horrible, guilty, terrible mother, all those things.** I think it might have been different if she didn't have the eating problem but um, because she doesn't really eat for anyone else. … **That adds more pressure** so I feel like **when I'm not there that increases the time when she might not have opportunities to eat** um, I think that I'd still not want to work even if she didn't have an eating problem but the fact that she does have an eating problem makes me you know, more strongly opinionated about that.

Example 7. Role-Anchored/Mother, Nonoppositional

One of the things that I have decided, and I decided a long time ago and I am just as glad that I did is that I don't care what people think, that my kids come first. And so most of the time I had still done what I needed to do. And we had a parent teacher meeting two weeks ago, they had it at eight-thirty in the morning -- is that the most ridiculous thing that you ever heard? -- and I already had patient scheduled. **And I debated it and debated and I said, "Well, a good professional would just suck it up and miss the parent meeting." And I decided I am not the good professional**. And I went to the secretary and said, "Can we just block out this time until 10:15", and she did it, **'cause like I told you the staff here are like totally supportive of me.** And I went to the parent-teacher meeting and came back. … The first patient was this old man who I knew very well, and I said, "I was at my daughter's parent-teacher meeting". **He was like, "I'm so glad" -- people like totally understand and patients are supportive. …** I will be on call, and I will be talking to a patient [from] home and a kid will come in screaming or something will happen. Then they see that it is a real person, um my son came in and was jumping on my bed. ... I told him to leave and I said, "I'm counting to three." … The [patient] said, "We have to count to five in our house." [laughter] **Most of the time I mean it makes me more human.**

Conclusions

This study offers a developmental, dynamic, and semiotic approach to the investigation of women's coordination of working and mothering, and, more broadly to the study of social roles. This perspectives affords a means of investigating complex, semiotically regulated processes involved in women's constructions of roles, and therefore complements outcomes-oriented studies. Roles, goals, and beliefs, in this view, are not seen as static mental or social entities but as "entities" only in the sense that the analyst can identify a dynamic metastability in goal orientation which emerges through action processes over time.

Coordination of working and mothering involves a continual process of taking goal-oriented "perspectives" in real-life problems, contexts, and events. These perspectives – ego-anchored, child-anchored, or anchored in professional or maternal roles – mediate the person's thinking, feeling, and acting in-the-moment.

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Perspectives are semiotic regulators or meaning complexes that mediate action, thinking, and feeling in the domains of working, mothering, and coordinating the two. Perspectives are a complex of institutional, sociocultural, and personal meanings on a situation, problem, or event, and a imply a goal-orientation.

A myriad of unique, particular circumstances and contingencies contribute to women's construction of their maternal and professional roles as oppositional or nonoppositional. However, all of these circumstances and contingencies are evaluated in the moment, from some perspective, anchored in the self, the care-giver role, the work role, or the family role more broadly.

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